

The Nursing of Cowslip

By ELIZA ORNE WHITE

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IT ALWAYS was easy for Miss Deborah to make a choice, and she had chosen Cowslip with hardly a moment's hesitation. Therefore it was not Lucy's fault that she wanted, but merely the support of her admiration. Cowslip was a pretty little Alderney. The only fault that could be found with her looks was a white patch placed on her face in an irregular way, which Lucy felt instinctively would be very trying to Letitia, and yet it did not seem of sufficient importance to prevent the purchase.

When the cow arrived the whole family went out to the barn to see her installed, and John, Esther and the children were loud in her praises. Miss Letitia looked at her in a more critical spirit.

"How many cows did you have to choose from?" she asked Deborah.

"Three."

"I should think you might have found a better looking one."

"Why, I love that deep fawn color," said Esther.

"The color is all right, but that white patch on her face drives me wild. It is so one-sided."

"I didn't think about that," said Deborah.

"I never knew any one with so little aesthetic sense as you have," Letitia remarked plaintively. "I should have bought a cow that was not conspicuous. However, if you and Lucy like her it is of no consequence whether I am satisfied. I am quite accustomed to accepting the choice of others. Only I can't see how two people with average eyes could have looked at that cow without noticing that the white spot gave her a weird expression. Her milk will be just as good," she added with an assumption of cheerfulness.

Miss Deborah's pleasure in the possession of the cow was considerably dampened. She tried to recollect whether Daisy and Dandelion had white spots on their faces, and went so far as to suggest that they might effect an exchange.

"No," said Miss Letitia. "You have bought her and it is best to keep her."

Letitia had nothing but the highest praise to give Cowslip's milk and cream. "I had no idea there was such a difference between cow's milk and milkman's milk," she observed graciously.

The baby's drooping health revived, the children took long draughts of milk at frequent intervals, and the family revelled in desserts with an accompaniment of whipped cream. They were a happy family for a month, and then the Alderneys are more delicate than any other cows," Miss Letitia observed ominously at breakfast one morning.

"Look here, Letitia Wyatt," said Miss Deborah. "I will stand a great deal from you, but that is a little too much. The next time we have a cow you may choose her and see to the whole care of her. I have the bother of buying Cowslip, and I had had no end of trouble with her first and last, and I won't stand being criticised."

Letitia looked at her sister reproachfully. Deborah's occasional outbreaks of temper were one of the chief trials of her lot. They were so unreasonable, so unexpected.

"My dear," she said gently, "I was not criticising. I was merely stating a fact. Miss Letitia had never ceased to be thankful that she had inherited her mother's even temper."

"I was a beast," Miss Deborah owned remorsefully. "I am tired out with anxiety about Cowslip. She is a dear creature and she looked at this morning with such sad, reproachful eyes, begging me to do something to help her. Heaven knows I would spend my life with her if it would do any good."

"Why don't you hold an umbrella over her, Aunt Deborah?" Jack suggested.

"I have been thinking of something of the kind. The veterinary surgeon says she is too ill to be moved. We can't even get her into the shade. Patrick has tied a wet sponge to her horns, but she still feels the heat. I proposed to Patrick that he should make some sort of a shelter for her, but he didn't see it in that light. He was 'dew' with other work," he explained it. That is the trouble with having only a tenth of a man. When I am rich I shall keep a whole one. I wish Laura Macauley would lend me her sketching umbrella."

Lily and Jack dashed off in quest of Miss Macauley. They were not commissioned to do so, but thought it well to take time by the forelock.

Laura Macauley, cool and self-contained, was sitting on her side piazza with the latest Atlantic Monthly in her hands, when two breathless, disheveled children rushed up to her.

"Please, Miss Laura, Aunt Deborah wants to borrow your sketching-umbrella," Jack panted.

"Your Aunt Deborah wants to borrow my sketching-umbrella?" Miss Macauley repeated incredulously. She had never associated the fine arts with Miss Deborah Wyatt.

"It is for the cow," Lily explained.

Miss Macauley was under the impression that somebody wanted to make a sketch of Miss Deborah's favorite. "Who paints at your house?" she inquired.

"It is for the cow," Lily repeated. "She is sick, and we thought it would be a good plan to hold an umbrella over her, and yours is the biggest in town."

"Did your Aunt Deborah send you here?"

"She didn't exactly send us," Lily confessed. "She just wished you would lend her the umbrella, and so we came for it to save time."

Miss Macauley's sense of humor was not of the keenest, but the picture of Miss Deborah Wyatt, who had always scorned the amount of wasted time that the sketching umbrella represented, being reduced to abjectly borrow it for her cow appeared even to her. She threw back her head and laughed.

"The cow is real sick," said Jack. "I don't see why you think it's so funny."

"We've got it, Aunt Deborah," the children said a little later, as they thrust the sketching umbrella into Miss Deborah's astonished hands.

"My dear children! Who told you to go for that umbrella?"

"I was only joking. I never dreamed of really borrowing Laura's sacred umbrella. Letitia, do you think I ought to send it back?" Miss Deborah's outbreak of temper had left her in a chastened mood. Under these circumstances she was willing to ask her sister's advice.

"I don't know. What did she say, children?"

"She laughed and laughed when she heard the cow was sick. I guess she wouldn't think it was so funny if it was her cow. And she said—what was it she said, Lily?"

She was so particular for us to remember it exactly."

"She said, 'Please give my compliments to your Aunt Deborah, and tell her I am sketching under a tree.'"

"You may as well keep it, as she was kind enough to send it," Letitia counseled. So the umbrella stayed. Miss Deborah and the children went with it into the enclosure behind the garden, where the cow was stretched limply on the grass. Miss Deborah planted the umbrella firmly in the ground, and its generous shade kept the sun from poor Cowslip's head.

"There," said Miss Deborah when her work was accomplished. "I am glad that umbrella is doing useful deeds for once in its life. Children, run in and ask your Aunt Letitia to give you the big palm-leaf fan that stands on the top of the right-hand bookcase in the library and I will fan this poor creature; the flies are troubling her. And bring out the little camp stool."

There was nothing funny to the children in the picture their Aunt Deborah made as she sat on her camp stool that hot forenoon, waving her large palm-leaf fan, and it is safe to assert that the humorous side did not strike Cowslip. Miss Letitia was amused when she sallied out toward 12 o'clock to see how her sister was faring.

"Deborah, you look too absurd in your short skirt with that huge fan under that immense umbrella. You remind me of a toad under a toadstool. I never saw anything so funny in my life."

"I am glad if you are amused," said Letitia. "I wish you could see yourself," said Miss Letitia, and she laughed again. "Perhaps you would like me to send your dinner to you?" she added ironically.

"I should like to swear at you, Letitia Wyatt, that is what I should like. You are enough to drive a saint crazy."

"I didn't mean to make you angry. I never can tell what is going to make you angry," Letitia remarked in a laughing tone. "It was merely in fun. You can usually see the funny side of things as well as any one."

"If you think it is easy to see the funny side of the dangerous illness of your only cow, when you have been brooding like a lobster in her service, you can take your turn and try it. I am a little tired, and will give up my place to you willingly."

"Thank you. The sun always gives me a headache."

"It is lucky that I am so constituted that I like the scorching sun."

"Deborah, dear, I am sure you are very tired. Do leave that cow to herself. A few flies won't hurt her. You are of more importance than the cow. If she is going to die she will die, and if she is going to get well she will get well."

"Goodby, Letitia Wyatt. I have enjoyed your call exceedingly, but I think you ought not to stay out any longer in the broiling sun."

"Why don't you get Lily and Jack to fan her?"

"Why don't I get chain lightning to help me?"

"Deborah, I insist, for your own good, upon your coming into the house at once."

"Letitia, I won't."

Miss Deborah had been fully intending to take a recess, but she was not going to be ordered in by Letitia.

Miss Letitia went back and held a family council. As the result, Lucy came out presently with a glass of lemonade and a piece of sponge cake.

"Now, Deborah, just let me fan Cowslip for a few minutes," she coaxed, as her sister gratefully accepted the proffered lunch.

"My dear, you will get a sunstroke. I shall not allow it on any account."

"Then come in with me; when it gets cooler you can fan her again."

"I am going to fan Cowslip as long as I like."

When John came home a little later he was taken into Miss Letitia's confidence.

"Your Aunt Deborah has one of her obstinate fits," she informed him. "She will stay and fan that cow until she drops."

"Aunt Deborah or the cow?"

"It is no joking matter. It is preposterous; a middle-aged lady, sitting under a sketching umbrella, fanning a cow, and declaring that she will not be dictated to by anybody. Try if you can't make her listen to reason, John."

John obediently went out to the enclosure.

"It is a pleasant day, Aunt Deborah," he began blandly.

"Very."

"A trifle warm?" he suggested.

"A trifle."

"Give me that fan. I want to try fanning Cowslip a minute."

She rose from her camp stool and let him take her place.

"How long have you been out here?" he inquired, as he swung the fan briskly back and forth.

"Sixteen years, judging by my feelings."

"I thought so. It is six months since I came out."

"Do you think Cowslip is going to die?" Miss Deborah inquired anxiously.

"I am pretty sure, if you and both sacrifice your lives for her sake, she won't."

"You ridiculous boy! Come, you never did like to do anything useful. Let me take my place again."

"Aunt Deborah, I am going to sit on this camp stool and fan the cow until you promise to go into the house."

"John, don't be obstinate."

"If I am, I inherited the trait from a collateral."

"Give me that fan."

"Don't you wish you could get it?"

"John, you are behaving like a boy of ten."

"Aunt Deborah, you are behaving like a girl of six."

"Well, perhaps you are right. I don't know what has got into me to-day, but when Letitia came out in her white morning gown, looking so cool and superior, and laughed at me in my short skirt, and told me to go in for her sake, I wouldn't stir a step."

"I haven't on a white gown, and I am not cool and superior."

"There are days when Letitia sets my nerves on edge," Miss Deborah confessed. "I know it is wrong of me, for she is always so reasonable and sweet-tempered."

"I am seldom reasonable, and only sweet-tempered by accident," John observed tranquilly. "Aunt Deborah, how long do you mean to keep me out here?"

"I advise you to go in at once."

"I shan't until you do."

"How can I allow myself to be routed by Letitia?"

"You are only being routed by me. I am not patient, and I shall begin to swear presently; you know you wouldn't like that."

"I am not so sure. It would be a relief to have somebody swear."

They walked amicably back to the house, John promising to come out again before dinner to give Cowslip another fanning.

I was sure John would make you listen to reason," Miss Letitia said serenely, looking up from the book she was reading in the shaded library.

Miss Deborah pressed her lips firmly together and gave her sister in pantomime behind her back, for John's benefit, the good shaking she longed to administer.

Cowslip improved. By the end of the day there seemed to be a fair probability of her recovery, but when Patrick came at night he thought it best not to try to move her for the present.

"I hope, Deborah, you won't think it necessary to fan her all the evening," Miss Letitia observed.

In the middle of the night Miss Deborah was dimly conscious of gusts of wind and a storm of rain beating against the house. She remembered that the entry window was wide open, and that the carpet would get soaked, but she was too tired to care. A blinding flash of lightning and an almost instantaneous peal of thunder recalled her sharply to this world.

"Cowslip!" she cried. "The poor dear will die of cold!"

Forgetting her fatigue she hastily flung on her gray-and-white outing flannel wrapper, and slipping her bare feet into her rubbers, seized a couple of old blankets and started for the front door. In the entry she paused, and gave a hurried glance at the umbrella stand. Laura Macauley's sketching umbrella was thrust like an unwilling guest in among the Wyatts' trim silk ones.

"It will spoil the looks of it," she said; "but no matter, it is in a good cause. I shall have to get her another. I suppose they are expensive; never mind. I hope she hasn't any tender associations with it, but if she has they must go."

Hastily taking the umbrella, she unlocked the door and started for the enclosure. The blinding flashes of lightning enabled her to find her way. In the intervals of darkness she paused occasionally to rest. When Deborah reached Cowslip at last she draped the blankets over her and planted the sketching umbrella firmly in the ground. It was large enough to keep off most of the rain.

"There, poor dear, I have done my level best for you," she said. "If you die it will not be my responsibility."

Meanwhile one member after another of the Wyatt household was awakened by the peals of thunder.

"Deborah," Letitia called to her sister, "the entry window is open."

"There was no answer. Deborah always looked after the windows, but as it was evident that she was asleep Letitia rose reluctantly and went to shut it herself. The rain was beating in violently and splashed on her face and hands.

Lucy in her pale blue wrapper came softly downstairs. "I am afraid to be up in the third story all alone in this awful storm," she confessed as she sought the safe harbor of Deborah's room.

"Come in to me, dear," said Letitia. Lucy was standing on the threshold of Deborah's door.

"Miss Letitia, there," she exclaimed. "Nonsense. Of course, she is there; she is asleep."

"Come and see for yourself."

The two sisters looked at the crumpled bedclothes and at the pillow, with its recent indentations, and then at each other.

"I believe she has gone out to the cow," said Letitia. "She will take her death of cold. Run down, Lucy, and see if Laura Macauley's umbrella is in the stand."

"I don't dare go. I am afraid of the lightning."

Miss Letitia went down a few steps and looked over the balustrade. "It isn't there," she said.

Either opened her door at that moment. "I want a little society," she remarked. John is asleep. Fancy sleeping through such a thunderstorm."

"Where do you suppose your Aunt Deborah is?" asked Miss Letitia.

"In bed, I hope."

"Out on the hillside with Cowslip. I don't believe she would care if she were struck and killed if only that miserable cow escaped. I wish she had as much consideration for her family as she has for animals. Now, of course, somebody will have to go out and get her in."

"I will wake John," said Esther.

Her voice made a gentle accompaniment to the storm. They could not hear what she said, although the door was ajar, but above the sound of the tempest came an exclamation in John's deep bass that

sounded suspiciously like "Damn the cow."

Presently he came out, still grumbling, equipped in his oldest clothes.

"You had better take the lantern," advised Miss Letitia from her room. "The lantern is in the china-closet cupboard, the right-hand cupboard, on the middle shelf."

A terrific peal of thunder drowned the close of her remarks, and John plunged downstairs and out into the storm, trusting to the lightning to guide his steps.

"How terrible it would be if one of them should be struck," Lucy suggested with a little shiver, as she crouched down on her sister's bed. Esther went in to see how the children and the baby were faring. They were peacefully sleeping. It took more than a little thing like a thunder-storm to wake them.

Meanwhile Miss Deborah, having fulfilled her duty in the station in life to which she had been called, was slowly making her way homeward. Her india-rubbers were filled with water, which gurgled out in cold streams on her bare feet with every step she took. She was drenched to the skin, but it was such a warm night that she enjoyed it. In fact the whole adventure was one that appealed to her daring spirit. After two or three brilliant flashes of lightning there was a period of Ethiopian darkness through which she struggled toward the beacon lights of the house. Presently a shadowy form rose at her side.

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But Ezra had arisen from the barrel on which he had been sitting and was leaving in wrath.

"Farm hand strike!" he growled as he passed through the door. "The idea of fillin' folks' heads with such nonsense! I'm in favor of unions, first, last and all the time. They're a protection against grinding monopolies and these city fellows, who have too much money, anyhow. But, of course, there ain't any need of them on the farms; and talk like that of Uncle Rastus Phelps is just liable to stir up trouble."

"Anyhow," continued Uncle Rastus calmly, "anyhow, this snapping turtle of old Bill Podgers's was a turtle that would have made his mark in any place. Bill had caught him when young and trained him to catch ducks. Just how he trained him no one but Bill and the snapping turtle knew. Bill wouldn't tell, and the turtle wasn't glibulous on the subject. But as a duck hunter that turtle was a success. Bill had bored a little hole in the back of his shell to put a string through. In the fall, when the ducks went to flock on the lake, Bill would go to the

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